

AFTER A LITTLE WHILE

1 Peter 4:12-14, 5:6-11

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John 17:1-11

May 24, 2020

TEXT: 1 Peter 5:10 “And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you.”

PURPOSE: To invite deepening trust in God, who is willing and able to see us through any crisis, but especially supports any who are suffering because of our allegiance to Jesus.

Already, it is Memorial Day weekend. Officially, tomorrow is the day we’ve set aside to remember and honor service men and women who have died. A few weeks ago, Lindy and I took Logan for a bike ride around the New Hampshire Veterans Cemetery. After the ride, Logan and I walked around the memorial garden, filled with monuments honoring service people. Logan liked climbing on whatever was climbable. I reflected on the stories and the people represented by those monuments. I’m now glad I did— that will be the only way this year that I’ll get to observe the formal reason for Memorial Day. Newbury’s observance at our Veteran’s Memorial, which I very much appreciate, will not take place tomorrow. And there won’t be any parades. Even the televised national observance won’t be a live performance on the mall.

But then, there is the way Memorial Day weekend serves to kickoff the summer season. And that certainly has been impacted by the stay-at-home orders. Maybe our grills are ready to go, and our boats are either in the water or loaded onto our car roofs. But the beaches won’t be open and the cookouts will be small. I heard that AAA did not even bother with estimating how many people are traveling this holiday weekend.

We’ve been living like this for over two months now, and for me, that reality sparks two conflicting responses. I certainly am settling into a reasonably constructive stay-at-home routine. That’s a good feeling, especially if the routine involves accomplishing something useful most days. But at the same time, I’m feeling that this way of living is intolerable, and this way of being church is unsustainable. Not being able to celebrate Memorial Day weekend the way we’re used to is a small part of a huge disruption. This is a very difficult time in almost every way. For some of us, it’s just a confusing inconvenience. For others, it’s downright awful.

With all that in mind, listen again to this passage from the First Letter of Peter, where it says, “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking

place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.” (1 Peter 4:12) Really? This ordeal, while not exactly qualifying as ‘fiery,’ came as a complete surprise, and it is very strange. Peter, of course, was not writing about the impact of a pandemic. The ordeal he was writing about had to do with the Christians to whom he was writing experiencing harassment and discrimination, possibly even persecution, because of their faith. Those Christians shouldn’t be surprised that their allegiance to a crucified Savior would subject them to hostility from others.

Nonetheless, there’s a whole lot in this brief passage that applies to what we’re experiencing in the season of COVID. “Cast all your anxiety on God,” he wrote. Our anxieties may have to do with worrying about getting sick, or about losing our job or our income, or about whether our business or even our church will survive. God is big enough to handle everyone’s anxieties, says Peter, because God cares about us. Hold on to that: God cares for you.

“Discipline yourselves, and be vigilant,” says Peter. Yes indeed. Whether you’re a parent, a young person learning online, an employee working from home, or a single person just trying to have a reason to get out of bed, some amount of discipline is what keeps us from collapsing into chaos. And we certainly need a hefty dose of vigilance—remember to wear a face mask, be careful with physical distance, do the work that’s needed to distinguish good advice from bad advice.

Remember that people everywhere “are undergoing the same kinds of suffering,” says Peter. In some places in the world, the suffering related to the pandemic is beyond what we can imagine. Taking what’s happening elsewhere to heart converts frustration to compassion.

All this was great advice for first century Christians experiencing hostility because of their faith. It’s equally good advice for twenty-first century Christians trying to stay safe and sane in the time of COVID. But Peter wasn’t all about offering advice. Peter also offered assurance. “After you have suffered for a little while,” he wrote, “the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen and establish you.” Peter could see that fiery trial was not going to last forever. Same with us: We can be reasonably confident that the acute phase of protecting people from this virus will some day conclude.

I'll be the first to admit that two months so far feels like more than "a little while." And the very real possibility that we could be living more or less like this for a while longer frequently sinks me into a deep resignation. But the history of humanity is filled with crises which, in the midst of them, seemed to be unending, but looking back after they subsided, fit into a reasonably defined time frame.

It's the same with our personal histories. Look back to a time in your personal life when you were enduring some misery or crisis which seemed at the time to last forever. I can think of a couple of such seasons in my life when I thought that the mess I was in was never going to end. But they did end, and as I came out of them, what I learned about myself in the midst of the mess enabled me to be a different person, a better person.

The people to whom Peter was writing were suffering because they were followers of Jesus. Here's a similar story from our own times. During the days when Nazism was the dominant ideology in Germany, the majority of churches embraced that ideology and even justified it theologically. They endorsed the Reich, and in return, the Reich supported them. But there were other Christians who recognized Nazism as the evil it was. These communities were known as the Confessing Church.¹ They were not only harassed and persecuted by the Nazis; they also were denounced by the Christians who aligned themselves with Nazism.

I wonder what it would have been like to read this passage from Peter's letter as a member of that Confessing Church. "After you have suffered for a little while, God himself will restore, support, strengthen, and establish you." The "little while" for the Confessing Church lasted for fifteen years. During that time, many of its leaders were arrested and some executed. I can't imagine how hard it would have been to hang in there when it would have been easy to give up and go to a state-supported church.

It turned out that the Confessing Church experienced what Peter had promised. The witness of the Confessing Church influenced Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, in our country, and the faith-based liberation movements in Central and South America. Its practice of faith certainly has influenced my practice of faith. In the long run, it was the Confessing Church, not the church aligned with the

¹<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Confessing-Church>

state, which was “restored, supported, strengthened, and established.”

We don't know what life after this pandemic will be like. We can be pretty sure that life after the pandemic will not be the same as life before it. But, as we make our way into that new way of living, we can rest assured of God's help as we work our way toward it. So here's the grace of God at work: God cares for us now, while we're neck-deep in this time of trial. And, God can be counted on to help us thrive in the new world coming into being as the pandemic subsides. “Faith,” wrote the author of the Letter to the Hebrews, “is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” (Hebrews 11:1) Living with assurance that God holds the future enables us to live faithful to God in the present. Living with the conviction that God's will for life will prevail is light shining in whatever darkness we may be in.

While I was mulling over what I was going to say this morning, I kept hearing a snippet of a song from an album I listened to in college. That would be a vinyl LP, mind you, printed even before 8-track tapes, if you can remember what they were. I've held on to my records, so as that snippet kept rolling around in my head, I went hunting for the album. It's from a song titled “Brightness, She Came” by an Irish folk trio known as the Johnstons. The song describes a person coming out of a failed romance. Nothing about pandemics or persecutions. But the verse I kept hearing describes a way we can be in the midst of this pandemic.

“Then brightness she came, just a flickering flame
of hope, midst the darkness all around.
So I'm still drifting here with my love and my fear,
but I now know that I'll never run aground.”

That's it. The pandemic has left us adrift with both our love and our fear. But flickering flames of light do pierce the darkness of our days. Moments of joy, experiences of peace, unexpected connections with distant friends, gifts of inward trust that all will be well. They are enough to assure us that we won't run aground. We won't be stuck forever in this trial, this limbo. Watch for those glimmers of light, and receive them as gifts from our loving God. See what happens to your way of navigating this truly strange time if you pay more attention to the light than to the darkness. See how trusting that God will ‘restore, support, strengthen, and establish’ enables us to persevere in faith for however long our ‘little while’ lasts.